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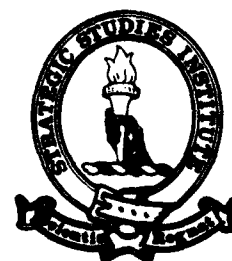
**THE ARMED FORCES  
IN A NEW POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

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**Gary L. Guertner**

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Gary L. Guertner

March 2, 1992

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## FOREWORD

Clausewitz was the first to record the rise of the nation-state and its ability to mobilize popular passions into mass armies. This transformation of politics, he observed, transformed the art of war. This was discussed in the context of Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity"—the government, the army, and the people. Any theory of war (or grand strategy) that ignored any one of these, Clausewitz warned, was certain to fail.

The modern corollary for the United States is the sudden post-cold war shift in public attention from foreign to domestic crises. This political transformation will have profound consequences for the armed forces. Popular passions can demobilize armies as rapidly as they mobilize them. The ability of the armed forces to compete for resources in the contemporary political environment will determine the degree to which the military leadership can adequately maintain the nation's defenses.

The political relationships among the people, the government, and the army, in the truest Clausewitzian sense, will determine the resources available to support the national military strategy. It is, therefore, essential that senior military officers understand the nature of the new domestic environment, what motivates it, and what its duration is likely to be.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish this essay as a contribution to the debate over national priorities.



KARL W. ROBINSON  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
Director, Strategic Studies Institute

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR**

GARY L. GUERTNER is the Director of Research at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. He holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in Political Science from the University of Arizona and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Claremont Graduate School. A former Marine Corps officer and veteran of Vietnam, Dr. Guertner has also served on the staff of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and as a Professor of Political Science at California State University, Fullerton. His latest book is *Deterrence and Defense in a Post-Nuclear World*.

## **THE ARMED FORCES IN A NEW POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

### **The Domestic Environment.**

The nation won the cold war and its armed forces won a brilliant air-land campaign in the desert of Iraq that established American military credibility during the transition to a New World Order. But playing the role of midwife to a new era does not mean that the United States will be willing to lead or nurture a world that it was largely responsible for shaping. Historically, victory in war has never assured that the American people or Congress would be willing to support the military forces necessary to make the next conflict less likely—and there has *always* been a next conflict.

World War I ended with a strident return to isolationism. The ambiguity of victory and the "unsavory" diplomacy of our allies (*realpolitik*) made it virtually impossible for President Wilson to sell his strategic vision of U.S. participation in a collective security system that was intended to replace the classic, but precarious European balance of power. The war to "end all wars" wasn't and didn't.

World War II ended on the decisive and psychologically pleasing terms of unconditional surrender. But the victory was hardly unconditional, as the cold war began even before the hot war ended. Even so, the American people were eager to bring the boys home, and would have easily picked up the banner of isolationism again had not Harry Truman, with the support of converted Republican isolationists, "scared the hell" out of the public. A new generation of American leaders learned that isolationism and appeasement could not contain threats to U.S. interests. The role of the United States as a global superpower was born. But policy declarations and strategies for containing Soviet expansionism preceded real military capabilities. It was war in Korea that gave saliency to the global threat and brought dollars to the defense budget to

support the large, permanent military forces that gave credibility to U.S. global commitments.

Victory in the cold war may have ended a 45-year aberration in the public's fundamental preference for domestic issues. From conservative Republicans like Patrick Buchanan to moderate Democrats like William Hyland (editor of *Foreign Affairs*) come calls for disengagement abroad in order to save resources for domestic priorities. Public opinion polls support these expressions. Surveys completed on the eve of the 1992 presidential campaign showed that 55 percent of the respondents believe that economic problems (unemployment, recession, inflation, the deficit, the poor) are the most important issues. By contrast, major foreign policy issues like the former Soviet Union, arms control, foreign aid or the Middle East crisis were mentioned only by 2-5 percent of those surveyed as the most pressing problems facing the nation.<sup>1</sup>

These public attitudes should not be surprising. Domestic priorities are the norm when a nation's security is not directly threatened. Former Speaker of the House, Thomas (Tip) O'Neill, captured these tendencies in his reflections on a lifetime in politics—"All politics is local."<sup>2</sup> For that reason, we can predict a high probability of an extended period of public introversion that will last beyond the 1992 presidential campaign.

Post-cold war world domestic problems are dramatically reducing the resources available for defense. These pressures are the result of a historic convergence of four deficits: (1) the *budget deficit*, compounded by the costs of the S&L crisis, and the political imperative to reduce federal spending; (2) the *trade deficit* and an ever more obvious need to make U.S. industry more competitive on the world market; (3) the *social deficit* visible in every congressional district in the form of local demands for resources in education, law enforcement, housing, public works (roads and bridges), health care, environmental protection and restoration, and, above all, jobs; and finally, (4) the *threat deficit* which coincides with the surge in domestic demands on resources: We won the cold war, and the Soviet threat to Europe and the Third World has retreated in geopolitical and philosophical defeat.



"Threat deficit" accurately describes the changes in the Soviet-American bipolar relationship. Yet, as this threat recedes, the Third World and Eastern Europe grow more unstable and volatile, endangering U.S. interests with diffuse challenges at constantly shifting points on the map. The Soviet threat deficit may, in fact, represent a shift from a centralized threat of global war to a highly decentralized threat of diverse regional conflicts that in the aggregate will require more versatile and flexible military capabilities in support of national strategy.

Formulating a new national military strategy and maintaining a force structure to execute it are not, however, priority items in Congress during the 1992 presidential election campaign. The members of Congress (and the President) read and are affected by opinion polls. The polls quoted above suggest that some combination of six major themes ("social deficit" issues) will dominate the national dialogue during and after the election:

- Economy (Read: Jobs)
- Education (Global competitiveness for jobs)
- Environment (As long as it doesn't cost jobs)
- Equality (Women and minorities in the job market)
- Expectations (For health, safety, homes, quality of life, all reinforced by the growth of a politically powerful senior community)
- Extraction (From foreign policy commitments associated with the cold war; more burden sharing by economically powerful allies)

The historic convergence of these four deficits and the mood swing toward "America first" have dominated the election year. They also coincide with significant demographic changes in American politics that suggest these trends will endure. Demographic data reveal:

- More women are becoming active in politics;

- More minorities are active in politics, and are increasing in numbers relative to "traditional" power centers;
- A record high retired cohort by the end of the century as baby-boomers begin to retire and collect their pensions.

When public opinion polls isolate these cohorts, the data reveal a strong preference for domestic over foreign policy issues and voting patterns supportive of congressmen identified with these issues.<sup>3</sup>

Growing public support for retrenchment from global commitments as a superpower is reinforced by a long, continuing cycle of congressional dominance of the policymaking process. In recent decades, the pendulum has swung from executive to congressional hegemony. The last cycle of executive supremacy lasted from Pearl Harbor to Tet. World War II and the cold war responsibilities of a global superpower created new and powerful executive bureaucracies. But Vietnam and the post-Vietnam era pushed the pendulum once again in the direction of congressional dominance. Perceptions of an "Imperial Presidency" created a new wave of congressional oversight and bureaucratic competition. New committees were formed, new organizations to serve and inform Congress were created, committee staffs were expanded, and a series of restrictive legislation (e.g., War Powers) was passed as a direct result of the cold war's most significant failure. Strategic victory in the cold war has not resulted in any perceivable diminution in congressional power. Institutionally, Congress holds the key to the future of our military forces.

### **Congress and the Military.**

Congress is not the enemy. Congress is the playing field. It represents and reflects with reasonable accuracy the desires of the American electorate. The institution is neutral in the sense that it can be more or less useful and responsive depending on the bureaucratic skills of the organizations that depend on its decisions. The most significant problem is

structural in nature. The executive branch is primarily responsible for establishing a strategic vision that identifies our international objectives and the strategies for pursuing them. The Congress combines authorizing legislation and budgeting authority to give it primary control of the means. This division of power and authority makes Washington a city where decisions are not routinely made on the basis of strategic vision or rationality. Rather, policy making is more often a contentious political process in which powerful bureaucracies and interest groups engage in conflict, bargaining and compromise. We do what we can agree on, and the winners are those with superior political skills who can identify and communicate interests that they have in common with members of Congress and their constituents. (The same is true within OSD and OJCS.)

The question is, therefore, how do the armed forces get their message before Congress? What strategy is most likely to succeed in an arena dominated by the domestic agenda and with decisions being increasingly formulated by committees and staffs with no direct military experience?

### **Preserving Military Sufficiency.**

If it is true that scarcity is the midwife of innovative strategic thinking, we are entering a golden age for strategists. The greatest difficulty will be the competitive resource allocation process controlled by a Congress that is preoccupied by the extensive domestic agenda described above. Given the current domestic environment, how do the armed forces maintain a base force that satisfies military requirements for the future? A three-step process is required: (1) Maintain military credibility; (2) Develop clear themes, rationales and priorities in force levels, R & D, and acquisition that identify the most cost-effective *mix* of technologies, integrated in a concept of operations that give smaller forces greater combat power—avoid piecemeal justifications of budget line items; and (3) Communicate these themes with persistence, and in ways that link military strength with economic vitality.<sup>4</sup>

The most fundamental question that the military leadership must pose to Congress is, what do you want military forces to

do? Only then can clear military priorities and force structures be established. Shortfalls between required missions and capabilities constitute risks. Both Congress and the executive branch must be reminded that excessive risk is like a large deductible in an insurance policy. In a crisis, it may prove to be both bad economics and bad strategy. American history is filled with examples of deteriorating military readiness that led to heavy losses and temporary defeat in America's "first battles" of most of our major wars.<sup>5</sup> The current concern of military leadership is to avoid the traditional and disastrous hollow state that normally follows a build-down in the wake of victory. General Sherman understood "downsizing" in his sardonic observation that peace and politics are always more damaging to an army than war.

Credibility and institutional prestige are among the most important assets to preserve during periods of "peace and politics." These will outlast the current fiscal crisis, provided that the armed forces build on their post-DESERT STORM reputation for excellence. This reputation would be put at risk if the senior leadership paints an overly stark view of the world or consistently presses Congress with worst-case assumptions. Some damage has already been done as the result of seven hypothetical threat scenarios developed by the Joint Staff and leaked to the press.<sup>6</sup> This controversial "enemies list" was intended to identify the general scale of future conflicts rather than specific foes. Nevertheless, it sparked a war of scenarios that has made consensus building on the defense budget even more difficult.<sup>7</sup>

Excessive risk is the traditional by-product of a broken policy consensus. Without consensus, the national strategy will grow increasingly disconnected from its military strategy and force structure. American interests in the world are unlikely to change. But interests, absent adequate military power, have never gone unmolested. The New World Order is only a hope. Multipolarity with rampant nationalism and the proliferation of modern weapons is just as likely to be a Hobbesonian world. If the Gulf War is our introduction to that world, its major lesson is that deterrence will fail again in the future. When it does, a

weakened military can only have an equally adverse effect on American political and economic instruments of power.

Military power, when not competing in the costly arms competitions that characterized the cold war, lends credibility to the political and economic instruments of power. These synergistic effects are often taken for granted. Part of the fault is an unfortunate tendency of military strategists to think in terms of threat-based strategy. Military strategy and force structure are *always* interest based. Interests are *defended* when threatened and *promoted* in the absence of proximate threats. The best way to achieve stability in the defense budget is to relate it to the interests that the American public worries about.

These interests remain largely unchanged. They include our own economic vitality that is, in turn, linked to the stability of the industrial centers of Europe and northeast Asia, and free access to vital resources. Promoting these interests in peacetime does not require the United States to be the world's policeman. It does assume, however, that if given a clear choice, the national pride of the American people will support its status as a superpower, capable of promoting or defending these interests, albeit with more of the burdens of power shared by our allies.

Promoting interests nearly always involves friends and allies who are more inclined to develop long-term, mutually beneficial economic and political relations if they are confident that the United States can promote those interests in peace and defend them in war. The leverage of American military power remains a vital component of national strategy.

In an era of growing uncertainty, the armed forces have a credible case to make. But that case needs to be repeated and refined for the duration of a long political process that has only just begun. In Congress and the White House, military requirements will be balanced against domestic ones. Opinion polls and the themes that have dominated the 1992 presidential campaign show that the balance has shifted decidedly to domestic issues.

The military has a responsibility to inform the debate over national priorities, emphasizing the resources that link military strength to economic well being at home and abroad. In the end, success will be measured by our ability to retain our core military strength as we regain our solvency and confidence in the wake of a cold war that cost us more than we might have imagined.

## ENDNOTES

1. Michael R. Kagay, "As Candidates Hunt the Big Issues, Polls Can Give Them a Few Clues," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1991, p. E3. See also R.W. Apple, "White House Race is Recast: No Kremlin to Run Against," *The New York Times*, February 6, 1992, p. A1.

2. Tip O'Neill, *Man of the House*, New York: Random House, 1987, Chapter 1.

3. RAND Arroyo Center, "Modernizing Under Uncertainty: A Framework For Thinking About the Army of the Future," RAND briefing dated May 1989, p. 6.

4. Studies by the Congressional Budget Office and the Office of Technology Assessment conclude that it is false to assume reduced defense spending will solve the economic crisis. *Defense News*, February 24, 1992, p. 54.

5. The example of "No More Task Force Smiths" has found its way into Army strategic briefings. For a longer historical perspective see, Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles, 1776-1965*, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1986.

6. See Patrick E. Tyler, "Hypothetical Conflicts Foreseen by the Pentagon," *The New York Times*, February 17, 1992, p. A8; "War Games, Money Games," Editorial in *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1992, p. A20; and Barton Gellman, "Pentagon War Scenario Spotlights Russia," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1992, p. A1. Reported assertions in one scenario that the defense of Lithuania against Russian attack is a vital U.S. interest is not the way to get a budget-conscious Congress to take defense requests seriously. See Barton Gellmann, "Pentagon Says War Scenario Doesn't Reflect or Predict U.S. Policy," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 1992, p. A12.

7. The most detailed "counter-scenario" came from Congressman Les Aspin, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Aspin calculated four options against seven potential regional aggressors. He is

attempting to build a consensus around a lower base force. For example, 9 active Army divisions compared to 12 in the administration's plan, 10 air wings instead of 15, and 360 ships instead of 450. See Patrick E. Tyler, "Top Congressman Proposes Deeper Cuts for the Military," *The New York Times*, February 23, 1992, p. A1; and Barton Gellman, "Debate Over Military's Future Escalates Into a War of Scenarios," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 1992, p. A20.

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